

Message Text

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ACTION EUR-12

INFO OCT-01 ISO-00 CIAE-00 PM-04 H-02 INR-07 L-03 NSAE-00

NSC-05 PA-01 PRS-01 SP-02 SS-15 USIA-06 SAJ-01 SAM-01

OMB-01 /062 W

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R 120729Z OCT 76

FM AMEMBASSY LISBON

TO SECSTATE WASHDC 8808

INFO AMEMBASSY BONN

AMEMBASSY LONDON

AMEMBASSY MADRID

AMEMBASSY MOSCOW

AMCONSUL OPORTO

AMEMBASSY PARIS

AMCONSUL PONTA DELGADA

USMISSION NATO

DIA WASHDC

USCINCEUR VAIHINGEN GER

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 1 OF 2 LISBON 6928

E.O. 11652: GDS

TAGS: PINT, PO

SUBJECT: LOCAL ELECTIONS: NOT QUITE A REFERDENDUM

REFS: (A) LISBON 6728 (DTG 301745Z SEP 76),

(B) LISBON 5917 (DTG 301746Z AUG 76),

(C) LISBON A-285 (NOTAL)

SUMMARY: THERE IS MORE AT STAKE IN THE DECEMBER ELECTIONS THAN THE THOUSANDS OF LOCAL OFFICES TO BE FILLED. CONTRARY TO SPECULATION, THE ELECTIONS DO NOT SHAPE UP AS A REFERENDUM ON THE GOVERNMENT. LOCAL PERSONALITIES AND ISSUES WILL HEAVILY INFLUENCE THE OUTCOME, PARTICULARLY IN RURAL AREAS. ANY SIGNIFICANT SHIFT IN ESTABLISHED VOTING PATTERNS, HOWEVER, WOULD CARRY IMPORTANT NATIONAL POLITICAL IMPLICATIONS. END SUMMARY.

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1. SETTING THE STAGE: PORTUGAL WILL GO TO THE POLLS DEC 12 FOR THE FOURTH TIME SINCE THE APRIL 1974 COUP. AT STAKE ARE ABOUT 50,000 OFFICES IN 304 MUNICIPALITIES AND MORE THAN 4,000 PARISHES. THE ELECTIONS WILL COMPLETE THE PROCESS OF SELECTING THE DEMOCRATIC INSTITUTIONS OF GOVERNMENT PROVIDED FOR UNDER THE CONSTITUTION.

2. WHAT'S AT STAKE: FOR THE COMPETING POLITICAL PARTIES, MUCH MORE IS AT STAKE THAN THE OFFICES BEING CONTESTED.

-- FOR THE PS: THE SOCIALISTS ARE CONFIDENT OF VICTORY. AND WITH REASON. THEY WROTE THE ELECTION LAW; THEY HAVE THE ORGANIZATION; THEY CONTROL THE GOVERNMENT; AND THEY HAVE SOARES, PORTUGAL'S BEST CAMPAIGNER. THE SOCIALISTS HAVE CAPTURED THE INITIATIVE THROUGH FORCEFUL GOVERNMENT ACTIONS IN THE EDUCATION, LABOR, MEDIA, AND AGRARIAN SECTORS. IF THEY WIN BIG, THEY BELIEVE THEY WILL BE IN A POSITION TO HOLD THE GOVERNMENT FOR THE NEXT FOUR YEARS.

-- FOR THE PSD: FOR THE SOCIAL DEMOCRATS, EX-PPD, THE ELECTIONS REPRESENT AN OPPORTUNITY TO DEMONSTRATE THAT THEY HAVE THE POPULAR SUPPORT AND REGIONAL STRENGTH WHICH DEMANDS REPRESENTATION IN THE GOVERNMENT. THE PSD DOES NOT EXPECT LOCAL ELECTIONS TO BE DECISIVE IN FORCING A COALITION. BUT PSD LEADERS BELIEVE THE PARTY MUST AGAIN SHOW THAT IT IS PORTUGAL'S SECOND PARTY TO POSITION ITSELF FOR ENTERING THE GOVERNMENT WHEN THE SOCIALISTS FALTER. THE PSD IS NOT PRESSING NATIONAL ISSUES; IT IS CONCENTRATING ON BUILDING LOCAL ORGANIZATION. BUT THERE ARE RISKS. THE PSD CANNOT AFFORD TO LOSE GROUND EITHER TO THE CENTER DEMOCRATS OR TO THE SOCIALISTS. SIGNIFICANT LOSSES WOULD DAMAGE PSD CREDIBILITY AND COULD START A DOWNWARD SLIDE FROM WHICH THE PARTY MIGHT NOT RECOVER. PSD LEADERS ARE CURRENTLY DOWNPLAYING THEIR OPPOSITION ROLE, ALTHOUGH THIS WILL NOT LAST. THE SOCIAL DEMOCRATS CAN BE EXPECTED TO BECOME MORE CONFIDENTIAL

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STRIDENT AS ELECTION DAY APPROACHES.

-- THE CDS: THE CENTER DEMOCRATS ARE LOOKING BEYOND THE LOCAL ELECTIONS. THEY SEEK TO PRESENT THEMSELVES AS THE ONLY VIABLE ALTERNATIVE TO THE SOCIALISTS. THE "ALTERNATIVE 76" THEME STRUCK DURING THE LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY CAMPAIGN HAS BEEN BROADENED. BY INTRODUCING AN OPPOSITION STATUTE IN THE LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY, CDS LEADERS HAVE

GOTTEN THE TACTICAL JUMP ON THEIR PSD RIVALS.
BUT, ORGANIZATIONALLY, THE CENTER DEMOCRATS STILL
ARE WELL BEHIND THE PSD. ALTHOUGH THE CDS STRATEGY
IS LONGER-TERM, PARTY LEADERS WOULD BE DELIGHTED
TO ENTER THE GOVERNMENT NOW. THUS THE CDS, LIKE
THE PSD, VIEWS THE ELECTIONS AS AN OPPORTUNITY TO
PUT ADDITIONAL PRESSURE ON THE SOCIALISTS TO ALLOW
THEM INTO THE GOVERNMENT. THE CDS IS MORE LIKELY
TO PRESS NATIONAL ISSUES, BUT TO THE EXTENT IT
DOES IT RUNS THE RISK OF MORTGAGING CURRENT
SUCCESS TO FUTURE HOPES.

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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 2 OF 2 LISBON 6928

-- THE PCP: THE COMMUNISTS ARE ON THE REBOUND.
THEY ARE STILL SMARTING FROM LOSSES SUFFERED
DURING THE PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION. AS CUNHAL
HAS PLEDGED, THEY ARE DETERMINED "TO COLLECT
WITH INTEREST" ON THEIR LOSSES. THE INABILITY

OF THE GDUP "POPULAR POWER" MOVEMENT TO OVERCOME
INTERNAL BICKERING HAS MADE THE PCP TASK EASIER.
FOR THE PCP, IT'S BACK TO BASICS. IT'S A RETURN
TO THINGS WHICH HAVE WORKED IN THE PAST: HARD WORK
AT THE LOCAL LEVEL, AND A RETURN TO ALLIANCE WITH
THE FELLOW-TRAVELLING MDP. THE COMMUNISTS ARE KEEPING
THEIR HEADS AND THEIR RHETORIC DOWN AND CONCENTRATING
ON THE KIND OF ORGANIZING AND PRECINCT WORK
WHICH WINS ELECTIONS.

3. IS IT A REFERENDUM?: THE DECEMBER ELECTIONS
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ARE BEING TOUTED BY MANY AS A REFERENDUM ON THE
SOCIALIST GOVERNMENT. BUT IT IS NOT THAT
SIMPLE. THE NATURE OF THE CONTEST MILITATES
AGAINST THIS. OBSERVERS OF ALL POLITICAL PERSUASIONS
CONCEDE THAT LOCAL PERSONALITIES AND LOCAL
ISSUES WILL PLAY A MAJOR ROLE. ALL PARTIES
ARE COMPETING FOR THE RELATIVELY FEW "BIG" NAMES
AVAILABLE AT THE LOCAL LEVEL. "BOSSISM" IS
STILL A MAJOR FACTOR, PARTICULARLY IN THE
RURAL AREAS, BOTH NORTH AND SOUTH. THE CHURCH
IS A FACTOR IN THE RURAL NORTH. CAMPAIGNS PITCHED TO
NATIONAL ISSUES ARE LIKELY TO HAVE LITTLE IMPACT
LOCALLY. THEY WILL HAVE EVEN LESS SIGNIFICANCE UNDER
THE ELECTION RULES WRITTEN BY THE SOCIALISTS (REF A). THE
OPPOSITION PARTIES UNIFORMLY CONCEDE THE TREMENDOUS
ADVANTAGE HELD BY THE GOVERNMENT PARTY. THE MORE
HISTORICALLY-MINDED AMONG THEM NOTE THAT GOVERNMENT
PARTY HAS NEVER BEEN DEFEATED IN A PORTUGUESE ELECTION.

4. THE UNSATISFYING ANSWER: AT THIS POINT, STILL
NINE WEEKS BEFORE ELECTIONS, ALL PARTIES ARE
HEDGING THEIR BETS. NONE, NOT EVEN THE PS, IS
WILLING TO ADMIT THAT THE ELECTIONS CONSTITUTE
A REFERENDUM. SOARES HAS SAID THAT THE TRUE
SIGNIFICANCE OF THE ELECTIONS CAN ONLY BE KNOWN
AFTER THE RESULTS ARE ANALYZED AND THAT THE
SOCIALISTS WILL KNOW HOW TO INTERPRET THEM.
SOARES TOLD VISITING U.S. LABOR LEADERS IN LATE
AUGUST THAT, IF THE SOCIALISTS SUFFERED A MAJOR
DEFEAT, HE WOULD SEEK A VOTE OF CONFIDENCE IN
THE ASSEMBLY. OTHERWISE, GIVEN THE INCOMPATIBILITY
OF THE OTHER PARTIES, THE SOCIALISTS WOULD
EXPECT TO GOVERN ALONE DURING THE NEXT FOUR
YEARS (REF B).
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